



# Modern Republicanism and the History of Republics

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*Modern Republicanism and the History of Republics<sup>1</sup>*

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In the modern world there are some political theorists – for example, so-called “rational-choice theorists” – who make only the slightest use of historical analysis in their normative political discourse. But there are other theorists whose work depends in concrete ways on historical research. One influential group of modern political thinkers, for example, advocates of what is variously called civic humanism or republicanism, advance their claims not merely through force of argument, but also through interpretations of historical sources and texts. Modern republican theorists claim that their movement is inspired by, or a revival and continuation of, a tradition of thought going back to antiquity, a tradition labelled “classical republicanism.” The claim is not a trivial one, since modern republicanism has sometimes presented itself as a “third way,” contrasting itself with the more utopian claims of socialism, oriented towards an ideal future, and liberalism, which treats the individual in abstraction from the history and traditions of his community.<sup>2</sup> Modern republicans see themselves as realists grounded in history, reviving a set of beliefs and practices that are possible precisely because they are known to have been believed and practiced in the past. Philip Pettit lays out a project to

free citizens from various forms of dependence and arbitrary power, enlarging the scope of self-government and equalizing power-relations in society. He and his close ally, the historian Quentin Skinner, have made explicit claims that classical republican theory provides valuable resources that can inform the prudence of modern republicans and designers of public policy. They have made the even stronger claim that their notion of political liberty as “non-domination” is a distinct conception of liberty that can be found in the thought and practice of premodern republics, and that it should challenge and complicate the distinction between positive and negative liberty widely employed by modern political philosophers since Isaiah Berlin’s classic essay of 1958.<sup>3</sup>

The “non-domination” concept of political liberty draws attention to a type of liberty not covered by Berlin’s dichotomy, a freedom that is enjoyed by persons who are not subject to other persons or groups that have “the capacity to interfere in their affairs on an arbitrary basis.”<sup>4</sup> This type of freedom is neither freedom from interference with one’s choices (negative liberty), nor self-mastery or self-governance (positive liberty). It does not look to rights guaranteed by the state to protect certain zones of autonomy, but aims to enlarge the scope of free activity by shaping laws, institutions and customary norms in such a way as to equalize power in society and reduce arbitrary forms of dominance, whether economic or political.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, for republican freedom to be compromised, it is enough for the mere possibility of being dominated by an arbitrary power to exist in a polity. An absolute king, even one who is virtuous and just, takes away his subjects’ freedom (and therefore their happiness) by the very fact that he is absolute. Pettit, following Skinner, holds that this “non-domination” concept of liberty, before

liberalism, was the chief way in which liberty was understood and practiced in the classical republican tradition from the Roman republic to the British Commonwealth of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup>

The historical claims of modern civic republicans have not gone without their critics – most notoriously, the scorched-earth approach of David Wootton. Wootton has claimed, in effect, that the notion of a republican tradition is factitious in the logical sense, i.e. that the words “republic” and “republicanism” have been used to describe historical phenomena so diverse that they can have no common essence.<sup>7</sup> Other methodological criticisms have been advanced as well: for example, Dario Castiglione’s warning that searching for the ancestry of modern ideas inevitably results in a kind of tunnel vision. He observes that modern republican theorists, in search of a usable past, have a tendency to reify eclectic and ad hoc arguments into a unified “republican tradition,” and suggests that we should rather speak of several distinct republicanism.<sup>8</sup> The goal of the present paper is different. Its purpose is to investigate the historical claims of modern civic republicans more concretely, by examining the writings of political thinkers of the Italian Renaissance. The aim will be simply to find out whether the characterization of premodern republican thought by modern republican theorists is accurate. I shall be concentrating primarily on the question of whether Italian Renaissance humanists have a conception of liberty as non-domination, and whether there is evidence for the related claims that premodern republican theorists regarded virtue and the active life as instrumental to acquiring this form of liberty.<sup>9</sup> I shall also question whether

Renaissance ideas of liberty can be as easily separated from notions of hierarchy and elitism as modern republican theorists seem to assume.

One other point needs to be made by way of introduction. That relates to the position of Machiavelli with respect to Renaissance political thought. His brand of political prudence is, to be sure, highly characteristic of one tendency within a broader Renaissance culture, but he is by no means a typical Renaissance political thinker. In fact the most important political thinkers of the Renaissance are Aristotle and Cicero, or more accurately, Aristotle and Cicero as they were understood by the Renaissance. Renaissance humanists before Machiavelli who composed formal works on political topics, such as Coluccio Salutati, Pier Paolo Vergerio, Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Matteo Palmieri, Bartolomeo Platina, Francesco Patrizi and Aurelio Lippo Brandolini all operated within a broad Christian Aristotelian framework and used humanist versions of Aristotelian and Ciceronian political terminology. Machiavelli, while dealing with the same set of problems, consciously challenged, rejected and overturned the whole approach to politics developed by his humanist predecessors, particularly their highly conventional ideas about virtue and justice. In substantive terms he had much more sympathy with popular government than any of his forebears, and he was far more critical of Christianity than any writer of his time. Thus for most of the sixteenth century Machiavelli's political writings were less influential than those of Aristotle and Cicero. The greatest of the humanist writers on politics, the Siennese writer Francesco Patrizi, though unknown today, was far more popular than Machiavelli for most of the century. Patrizi's works on republican and princely government were printed 37 times, translated

into all the major European languages and reduced to epitomes for classroom use.<sup>10</sup>

Patrizi was uncontroversial, the voice of conventional humanist wisdom, the darling of schoolmasters throughout Europe. Machiavelli's *floruit* as an author, judged in terms of the number of editions of his works, did not come till the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Even then the spread of his ideas about statecraft was viewed with alarm in many quarters, even with paranoia, and he was the subject of virulent attacks well into the seventeenth century.<sup>11</sup> Machiavellian was an adjective of vituperation, rather than praise.

Clarifying the place of Machiavelli in Renaissance political theory is necessary, as modern theorists of the non-domination model of liberty build their edifices to a surprising extent on the single example of Machiavelli.<sup>12</sup> Machiavelli of course is the only Renaissance political theorist who belongs to the modern canon of political works read in universities, so it is natural that he should be emphasized. Nevertheless, it needs to be recognized that in most respects he was an outlier from the mainstream of humanist writings on politics—mostly written in Latin—beginning with Petrarch and Salutati and continuing at least to Lipsius. Despite the use of Machiavelli by later writers like Harrington it is misleading to think of him as typical, or even paradigmatic, of the Renaissance humanist tradition of political reflection.<sup>13</sup> He is to the Renaissance what Ptolemy of Lucca is to the scholastics: someone who shares sources and language with his contemporaries but whose methods, conclusions and wider moral outlook differ sharply from theirs. Machiavelli was the most original political writer of the Renaissance. For that reason if for none other he was *sui generis*.

How was political freedom understood by most humanist writers of the Renaissance who were sympathetic to non-monarchical government? The writings of Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit and their followers prepare us to find therein some version of the non-domination model, for example, the idea that one must engage in the active life of the citizen in order to prevent becoming the victim of arbitrary power and of exploitation by the powerful; that law and institutions should be designed to prevent domination of society by the powerful and to help the weak secure their negative liberty. On this view the actions of the powerful need to be placed on view in the public forum, discussed and contested by the people. This was clearly a lesson that Machiavelli took from Roman history and one certainly finds echoes of it, in debased forms, in actual republican practice during the Renaissance. One of Lorenzo de' Medici's famous sayings, was "it is ill living for the rich in Florence unless they rule," meaning they need to be active politically to avoid being shaken down by the *popolo* or by hostile clientage groups. Less famous voices spoke of "play-to-pay" situations, where your interests and those of your clients needed to be represented in the public palace in order to prevent rivals from monopolizing public contracts or imposing unfair tax burdens. As they say in the American Congress, if you're not at the table you're on the menu. All this is consistent with a non-domination model of liberty (even if the examples cited suggest it was a model practiced by dominators as well as the dominated).

However, we are not interested here in republican practice so much as in the ways formal humanist texts discuss the question of republican liberty. The issue most commonly arises in the context of a courtly debating theme about the relative merits of

republics and monarchies. The best-known example is probably that found in Book IV of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Here Castiglione was merely summarizing the discussions in Francesco Patrizi's Latin treatises on republic and princely education, a staple for his humanist readers. Patrizi and other fifteenth century authors like Aurelio Lippo Brandolini raised the question whether all power should be concentrated in the hands of a single individual, suitably restrained by law, or whether it is possible to justify a power-sharing arrangement such as that found in Renaissance oligarchies.<sup>14</sup> By far the commonest argument in favor of this was the one that might be called the argument from the distribution of virtue. In Patrizi's treatise on republican education, he argued that there are cases where Aristotle's requirement for monarchy – that there be a single individual or family of outstanding virtue – is not met; one can find, says Patrizi, cases where a state has many virtuous individuals but no one of outstanding virtue. In these cases it would be unjust to place any one individual ahead of the rest.<sup>15</sup>

The assumption here (as elsewhere) is that virtue, understood as self-mastery, is a *title to rule*. This view was standard among humanists, whether republican or signorial. Virtue in humanist writings is not, as moderns republicans believe, merely a prophylactic against dominance by others. Behind Patrizi's position is the logic of rationalistic ethics, the most important ethical model inherited from classical philosophy. The virtues are defined as a set of habits or behavioral patterns that solidify the control of reason over the passions and appetites. As applied to the larger theater of the state, the rule of virtue requires identifying a wise and virtuous prince or an aristocracy to rule the passionate and appetitive parts of society. Behind this lay the classical assumption that nature arrays



mankind into natural pyramids of moral ability, with a few wise and virtuous individuals at the narrow top and the passionate and vicious many on the broad bottom. Moral excellence is something few can achieve. It is by nature a scarce good unequally distributed. Indeed, it is only because of its scarcity that it can be used as a claim to rule. If all were equally virtuous, or equally capable of virtue, the argument that the virtuous should rule would be trivial or useless. The argument, then, presupposes a meritocratic rather than an egalitarian outlook. Furthermore, in a good society the wise and virtuous rule, but for some Renaissance humanists this licensed a situation similar to some modern Marxian and socialist models, where enlightened rulers permit themselves to coerce ignorant subject populations in what is allegedly their own interest. For example, in most Renaissance republics the idea of differential virtue and prudence underwrote a graduated citizenship and a graduated deliberative process.<sup>16</sup> Ideally, the wise and virtuous should formulate policy, whilst the many should only have the right to a ye-a-or-nay vote on policies formulated by their betters.

Indeed, the wider assumptions that lay behind these historical arguments for republican government would seem to be incompatible with a non-domination model of liberty. For the Italian humanists, whatever guarantees of legal equality a republic might grant individual citizens, there is no entitlement to self-rule independent of merit. Those inferior in virtue are properly ruled, even coerced, by the virtuous. Renaissance republics like Florence and Siena may in practice have chosen office-holders by lot, but the Renaissance humanists generally disapproved of this practice precisely because it ignored the claims of virtue.<sup>17</sup> They preferred election and other presumptively meritocratic forms

of selection, rather than allowing chance, fate or Divine Providence to choose a polity's rulers. Renaissance humanists did not believe that human beings possessed an intrinsic dignity *qua* human that gave them a title to self-rule and political autonomy. Dignity – worthiness – was something earned, not ascribed. The more merit one displayed, the more one was entitled to liberty and self-government. It will be noticed that this form of elitism is more commonly associated with positive liberty than with negative liberty – or with republican liberty as described by Pettit and Skinner.

It is worth noting that this argument from the distribution of virtue was also extended to humanist discussions of international relations and the morality of empire. In Leonardo Bruni's *Panegyric of the City of Florence* and in his *History of the Florentine People* he advances the argument that Florence can justify her empire in Tuscany because she surpassed all other Tuscan peoples in virtue. All city-states by nature desire freedom, but not all are worthy of it, and those unworthy were justly dominated by more virtuous states.<sup>18</sup> This attitude, widely found in the fifteenth century, points up another of the difficulties facing modern civic republicans. Modern republican theorists take it as axiomatic that domination (or “alien control”) of one state by another is suboptimal,<sup>19</sup> but many Renaissance humanists did not see a contradiction in desiring liberty for themselves and dominance over others. “Dominion and liberty, for mortal men nothing is more dear nor more welcome than these two things,” ran a famous fourteenth century adage.<sup>20</sup> It was not until the time of Francesco Guicciardini and later Fabio Albergati that some republican theorists articulate a moral critique of free cities that imposed their rule on subject cities.

It is true that Bruni in the *Panegyric* and in his *History* tries to maintain that the Florentine subject cities were sometimes more free after submitting to Florence than they had been under their previous oligarchic and tyrannical governments. But his argument is based on the Florentines' imposition of the rule of law. The subject cities in the Florentine territorial state lost much of their power of self-determination, particularly in foreign policy, and Bruni believed that this promoted harmony in old Etruria. His claim that the subject cities were protected from arbitrary actions of powerful individuals by the rule of law is limited, however, by his exempting one powerful individual in particular, namely the Republic of Florence. As the subject cities were inferior in wisdom and virtue, they were expected to take direction in foreign relations from Florence. Florentines should try to do their best to persuade their allies and subject towns of the wisdom of Florentine policy, but in the end those towns had no legal or political recourse preventing their being ordered, for example, to provide troops for Florentine wars. This is clearly an argument incompatible with a non-domination model of liberty.

The argument from distribution of virtue is not, to be sure, the only argument deployed by Renaissance humanists in favor of republican liberty. Nearly as important was what might be called the argument from history. This argument is indebted to Cicero's *De officiis* and other ancient texts but was elaborated upon by a number of Renaissance republican writers, and has remained popular in the republican tradition to this day. It was first powerfully articulated by Leonardo Bruni in his *Oration for the Funeral of Nanni Strozzi* (1427), and later echoed by Bartolomeo Scala in his *Defense against the Detractors of Florence* (1496) and other writers. In the Strozzi oration Bruni

goes so far as to deny legitimacy to monarchies and aristocracies on the grounds that such forms of government have never in fact existed; they belong to a null set; all monarchies and aristocracies that claim to be such are actually masks for tyrannies and oligarchies. By process of elimination this leaves popular government as the one truly good government: Bruni is clearly thinking here of Aristotle's constitutional typology of the three good and three bad constitutions.<sup>21</sup>

Of course this is an invalid argument, as there can be no guarantee that the constitution left over is virtuous, and Bruni does not bother to argue that it can be. He is writing a panegyric, not a treatise.<sup>22</sup> The argument he advances is not theoretical but historical. Bruni is making what logicians would call a rash generalization, basing his conclusions about republican liberty on a single case, that of the Roman republic. Rome had her greatest moments of military power and cultural glory in the period between the expulsion of the Tarquins and the battle of Actium; the imperial period was one of moral corruption and imperial decline; hence the best form of government is that of a free people.<sup>23</sup> Borrowing from Sallust, Bruni claimed that the reason for the success of the Roman republic was its characteristic freedom to participate in public life, which led to a virtuous circle of competition for glory and empire amongst rival great men. Monarchs, by contrast, are said to be suspicious of virtue in their subjects. So a virtuous republic is preferred because it leads to the success of the state vis à vis other states. This might remotely be called a kind of non-domination model of liberty, in that liberty here prevents the republic from being dominated by other states. But note that the historical argument does not claim to show that republican power-sharing protects all citizens within the state

from the power of overmighty oligarchs. In the Roman case, as Bruni well knew, liberty to participate in politics led to gross inequities of political power. The dynamics of competition for glory in Rome positively encouraged and corrupted power-seeking individuals in the late republic, leading to the loss of liberty for most citizens. This was something Bruni chose to ignore; but humanists advocating monarchy were quick to emphasize it.<sup>24</sup> Roman history thus became an arena for testing the proposition that republican liberty could enable a state to dominate rival states, a proposition that Bruni, like Machiavelli, accepted and indeed championed. Of course to dominate other states means not to be dominated oneself, but this is hardly a basis for foreign affairs with which modern republican would be comfortable.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the argument from the distribution of virtue and the argument from history, the humanists also articulated an argument for republican liberty based on its ability to provide what we would call negative liberty, or freedom from interference. The definition of liberty most commonly quoted by republican theorists *prima facie* sounds rather like a negative concept: it is Cicero's definition in *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 34, that liberty is a power of living as you will. However, in its original context this definition does not align with the modern non-interference concept, since Cicero further explains that for the Stoics, "living" in the true sense of the word would be to live rationally in accordance with nature and human duty; the way to do this is to act with virtue, so we are returned to the self-mastery model of virtue and liberty. The definition does not allow room for the unconstrained pursuit of unspecified private ends; human ends are already given by Nature. Yet Renaissance republican thinkers often forgot or ignored this context,

possibly because they often quoted it indirectly from the jurist Baldus de Ubaldis, who added to the definition of liberty as a power of living as you wished the words “within the limits set by law and custom.”<sup>26</sup> Baldus thus takes a Stoic paradox about the equivalence of liberty and rationality and makes it into something more like a modern non-interference concept, a definition which establishes a zone of unconstrained behavior within boundaries set by law and decency.

Bartolomeo Scala quotes the definition in this form in his *Defense of Florence Against Detractors* of 1496. In this oration, written during his more populist, “Savonarolan” phase, Scala says the purpose of both monarchies and republics is to seek peace and security of living for their citizens and the “faculty of managing their own affairs in accordance with their personal will and with the private advantage of each.”<sup>27</sup> This is the obverse of Scala’s statement a few pages earlier where he says,

I think that, whenever men have united, they did so not for someone else's sake but for their own, and when they serve the common interest, they do so to derive their personal advantage from the public one. It is wrong, however, to infer from this that private advantage is to be put before public good. For truly, if private good is better and more easily to be found when the public good is served, who can doubt that the latter must be preferred even for the sake of the former? But this is no time to discuss the nobility of ends (§15).

This sounds at first glance like Skinner’s instrumental common good: one serves the common good so in order to preserve one’s liberty to pursue private ends. But note that liberty is not praised because it is an instrument to protect our private interest. In his

panegyric to liberty a few pages later (§18), Scala praises liberty in traditional terms, as a “divine and most excellent gift” which all noble individuals must try to obtain, as “an honorable ornament (*decus*) and prerogative (*praerogativa*) of our nature.”

The expression “prerogative” or prescriptive right, “of our nature” suggests that Scala may have believed, unlike other humanists, that all human beings (not just Florentines) are entitled to liberty, but he follows this statement by admitting:

But it is not enough, you will say, to want to be free, as most of us do; but to have learned how to become free and to make use of freedom: that is what is truly splendid and worthy of a free mind.

Scala then proceeds to make an argument that Florentines prefer republican government because it is an instrument to promote liberty and because they fear tyranny, both of the one and of the few. (Aristocracy is said to be the constitution that promotes virtue, but according to Scala it slips too easily into oligarchy). Both kingship and republican government seek “peace and security ... and the ability of each [subject or citizen] to manage his own affairs according to his personal will and his ability to manage his own affairs.” *Both* forms of government, not just republican government, aim at allowing citizens to pursue their *private* affairs freely. Scala’s prefers republican government because it serves everyone’s private interest better than monarchical government does. But this is not because it fosters civic virtue, but because its institutions are less easily corrupted. For example, republican deliberation is slower, less passionate, fairer and better informed than the deliberation of royal courts.<sup>28</sup> It is more likely to lead to stability

—that key criterion of constitutional excellence according to Aristotle—because stability is more in the interest of republican citizens than of royal counselors.

There is not a word here about not wanting to be dominated or to be subject to another's prerogative, nothing about the extra-legal exercise of arbitrary power, nothing about the need to participate in government and exercise civic virtue as a means of protecting one's private ends.<sup>29</sup> Scala's goal for states is that they provide stability and freedom from interference in the pursuit of private interest. If a monarchy, however absolute, can accomplish those ends, then it too will have achieved the purpose of government. Scala's claim is simply that the institutions of a republic like Florence are better suited to secure the private freedom necessary to pursue one's own interests. What is wrong with monarchy is not that the monarch might exercise power over the citizen in an arbitrary way, but that the institutions of monarchy such as royal councils and courts are less effective in promoting the citizen's free pursuit of his or her private interests. The objection is instrumental rather than ethical.

We seem to get closer to a non-domination concept of liberty in Alamanno Rinuccini's anti-Medicean dialogue of 1479, the *Dialogus de libertate*.<sup>30</sup> This work advanced the same Ciceronian definition of liberty as that used by Scala, but unlike Scala, Rinuccini was aware of its context in Stoic thought. Rinuccini knew that the definition presupposes a concept of self-mastery, and that living as you will really means living the way you ought to live, having a reasoned plan of life, living rightly in accordance with reason and duty and obeying rather than fearing natural law. Difficulties arise, however, when one tries to participate in politics under a tyrant. When political life



is corrupt, one can only engage successfully in politics by being equally corrupt. The tyrant's overwhelming power makes it impossible to speak truth freely before him. The man of integrity is either punished and excluded from power or he must retire to the country and cut off all ties with the active life of politics. (The latter is what Rinuccini himself had done, having refused to perform a corrupt act for the Medici, and the dialogue is meant to justify his political quietism to friends urging him to re-enter public service.) For the man of integrity in a corrupt state (as Rinuccini says, following the *De officiis*), liberty becomes an inner state, a kind of spiritual fortitude that enables one to resist the temptation to yield to corrupt influences and keep an unblemished soul. So Rinuccini's case at first sight looks like a magnificent example of a free man refusing to be dominated by arbitrary power.

In the end, however, his idea of freedom is not really akin to what modern republicans mean by a non-domination concept of liberty. Rinuccini has an affection for a (no doubt imaginary) *buon tempo antico* where Florentines could engage in politics without compromising their virtue. He approves the actions of the Pazzi conspirators who tried to kill the tyrant Lorenzo and restore that republic of the mythical past. But by liberty Rinuccini really means the power to live a morally good life, and this Stoic ideal is ultimately designed to be independent of the *status rei publicae*, i.e., its constitutional form. That, in a way, is the whole point. Improving the design of laws and institutions to minimize dependency and increase equality might be desirable, but this will not increase liberty in the true, inner sense of the word, for this liberty can only be achieved as the

result of philosophical and moral training. The active life of politics is at best a matter of duty. It is not a source of human perfection but rather a threat to it.

This brings us to the issue of the active and contemplative lives. Here we find a marked difference among modern historians and theorists. The older civic humanist strain of thought typified by the historians Hans Baron and J. G. A. Pocock saw Renaissance republicans as having promoted a particular vision of the good life. Through the active life of the citizen in politics and military affairs, through living a life of civic virtue, a man engaged in the active life could achieve the human good. This meant that citizenship, self-governance and civic virtue were all intrinsically valuable aspects of human flourishing. In other words, republican liberty in the Renaissance, on this view, was tantamount to positive liberty in Isaiah Berlin's sense.<sup>31</sup>

Quentin Skinner rightly saw that this older view imposed an Aristotelian and Greek finality upon texts that could not bear that interpretation; civic participation and self-governance in the Renaissance did not ordinarily subserve perfectionist goals.<sup>32</sup> The reason for this, I would suggest, is simply that the goal of human life in the Renaissance was supposed to be the province of religion, and most humanists avoided direct challenges to orthodox Christianity. Human perfection by definition could not be achieved in this life through human power, though some humanists like Bruni, following a famous quotation from Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, suggested piously that great virtue in the active life would be rewarded by beatitude in the next.<sup>33</sup> In any case, Skinner and other modern republicans understand the active life of political participation, civic virtue and self-governance to be *instrumentally* valuable for preserving political liberty,

construed as non-domination. Vigilant and virtuous citizenship, commitment to the active life, protected personal liberties against the invasions of arbitrary power.

As we have seen, this conception of the active life as an instrumental good is one that works better for Machiavelli than for most other humanist theorists. This is the case in part because the humanists understood the active life in a rather broader sense than is found in Aristotle or even Cicero. As was fitting in an age of commercial republics, Renaissance civic humanists often included commercial and private economic activity in the realm of the active life, as in Leon Battista Alberti's dialogues on the family or Bruni's commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics*. On the other hand, the active life of the citizen and its virtues are also commonly praised by humanists in the service of princely regimes; it is quite mistaken to think that ideals of citizenship were the exclusive property of republican theorists. Advocates of monarchy like Bornio da Sala or Francesco Patrizi (in his pro-monarchical voice) and Ottaviano Fregoso in the *Courtier* even use the terms *vivere civile* or *vivere libero* to describe political life under virtuous princes. In this broader sense of the active life, clearly, it cannot be construed simply as an instrumental safeguard of republican liberty.

Nevertheless, even when we are talking about republican writers, and even when the latter confine themselves to the active life of politics, it is doubtful whether modern republican theorists correctly state the typical humanist view of the active life and civic participation. The most popular quotation cited in humanist discussions of the active life comes from (pseudo) Plato's ninth letter, where, writing to Architas, who was tempted to withdraw from politics, Plato says "that none of us is born for himself alone; a part of our

existence belongs to our country, a part to our parents, a part to our other friends, and a large part to circumstances that command our lives. When our country calls us to public service it would be unnatural to refuse.” As filtered through Cicero’s *De officiis* this quotation is typically used to urge young men to enter public service and avoid a retired life of study or private endeavor. However, the many Renaissance writers who quote this passage typically do not argue that the life of involvement in public affairs will lead to happiness and human flourishing on the Aristotelian model; in fact they usually present public life as a disagreeable burden. But neither do they induce people to enter public life as a necessary evil, in order to protect their private interests and those of their kin and clients. Instead, the active life is presented, in the manner of the Stoics, as a duty that must be fulfilled. Human beings are not isolated persons but intrinsically social; they are born into families and clientage networks and cities and into a religion; each of these relationships implies duties, obligatory actions, which are discoverable by reason. These duties may be well done or badly, and the man who loves goodness and the God of Nature will do them well. He will earn the gratitude of those around him and win glory among posterity. These are real inducements. However, fulfilling one’s duties does not bring him beatitude in the next life; Christian theology taught that only God can give that. While Christian theology precluded a perfectionist value being attributed to the active life, it was probably rhetoric that prevented any use of the instrumentalist argument. Idealistic young men, then or now, are not ordinarily inspired to enter public service by being told it is a useful hedge against powerful enemies. That is a message to be whispered in the study, not shouted in the forum, and Renaissance humanists were

usually, in their imaginations at least, speaking in the presence of the *populus Romanus Quirites*.

In short: Among Italian Renaissance humanists who wrote on politics there was no “republican tradition” characterized by a consistent commitment to liberty, construed as non-domination, and aiming at the pursuit of private ends. The humanists were too deeply influenced by Greek philosophy for that. Non-domination arguments can be extracted from Machiavelli and perhaps other sources, but this is an insignificant strand in the tradition of humanist political thought as a whole.

The question remains, however, whether in the end this should matter for modern republicans. The answer to this question surely depends on what, exactly, a modern theorist believes the history of political thought is for. There is, to be sure, an imaginative appeal in the idea of a premodern republican tradition to which we can return. Especially if one starts from the idea that modern progressive politics has come to a theoretical impasse, there is appeal to the idea that we can retrace our steps, identify a wrong turning, and start over – it is the kind of appeal that is behind books such as Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment*, Alasdair Macintyre’s *After Virtue*, or even Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses*, which aims to show the contingency of entrenched modern ideas about social science in general.<sup>34</sup> There is appeal too in the idea that the past has something to offer the present, that it is not just a strange, unhappy country populated by moral monsters with whom we cannot possibly identify and who cannot be made to agree with us – the past of some progressive thinkers in our time. There is a longing to believe that our own age does not have all the answers and that previous ages did not get everything wrong.

Apart from this imaginative aspect, however, it should not matter very much to modern republicans that most Renaissance writers on politics do not have a non-domination concept of liberty. After all, we are only talking about, at most, 200 years of a tradition of thought going back to the Romans, and I for one am not prepared to say that a non-domination concept is not applicable to Cicero or Sallust or Tacitus, still less for the seventeenth century writers discussed authoritatively by Quentin Skinner in his classic *Liberty before Liberalism*. The non-domination concept, or something very like it, does seem to be found in Machiavelli, and that is not trivial. But for those interested in finding a non-domination concept of liberty in the Italian Renaissance, it would be best to turn away from the formal writings of humanists and look at the grubby practice of Renaissance republican politics. There one can find many republican statesmen struggling to keep their liberties and those of their clients in the face of powerful combinations of wealth and prestige, a situation not unlike the one that concerns modern neo-republicans. Politically active citizens of Renaissance republics, like their forebears in the medieval popular commune, devoted much effort to finding legal and institutional means to limit the influence of the powerful, or at least to prevent the dominance of any one party or individual.<sup>35</sup>

This was not, however, a major interest of the Renaissance humanists who wrote on politics and who dominated intellectually the period from Petrarch to Machiavelli and beyond. Their outlook was that of educators, not theorists, and their focus, in politics as in ethics, was on virtue. Virtuous rulers made any number of laws and institutions unnecessary; and laws and institutions, no matter how good in themselves, were useless

without virtue. Their approach to the reform of politics was quite different from that advocated by modern republicans. For them, education in virtue was the key to a successful polity; it was worth more than any number of laws, regulations and policies; it transcended the whole question of constitutions and even of political liberty. The humanists saw liberty as the reward of virtue, not its precondition; it was something to be merited, not a prescriptive right. All this seems foreign to our modern sensibilities. But that is not to say that the humanists' political thought is irrelevant to the modern world.





<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my colleague Mark Kishlansky for reading this essay and helping improve its style and argument.

<sup>2</sup> See the introduction to *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. J. Hankins, Cambridge 2000.

<sup>3</sup> PETTIT'S now-classic work is *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Oxford 1997. For SKINNER'S claims, see especially *The republican ideal of political liberty*, in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. G. Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli, Cambridge 1990, 293-309; in this earlier work, Skinner sees classical republicanism as exemplifying an alternative approach to securing negative liberty, rather than a distinctive concept of liberty. Later in ID., *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge 1998, and other writings, Skinner refers to this approach as the "neo-Roman" concept of liberty, distinct from the Aristotelian concept and the modern negative concept. Isaiah Berlin's essay, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, is most readily found in I. BERLIN, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford 1969.

<sup>4</sup> P. PETTIT, *Republican Freedom and Contestatory Democracy*, in *Democracy's Value*, ed. I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordon, Cambridge 1999, 165. The historical roots of this concept were first explored by SKINNER in *The Idea of Negative Liberty*, in *Philosophy of History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner, Cambridge 1984, 193-221, revised under the title *The Idea of Negative Liberty: Machiavelli and Modern Perspectives*, in ID., *Visions of Politics. Vol. II: Renaissance Virtues*, Cambridge 2002, 186-212.

<sup>5</sup> See P. PETTIT, *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency*, Oxford 2001.

<sup>6</sup> SKINNER, *Liberty before Liberalism*, esp. 49-55.

<sup>7</sup> D. WOOTTON, *The True Origins of Republicanism: the disciples of Baron and the counter-example of Venturi*, in *Il repubblicanesimo moderno. L'idea di repubblica nella riflessione storica di Franco Venturi*, ed. M. Albertone, Napoli 2006, 271-304.

<sup>8</sup> D. CASTIGLIONE, *Republicanism and its Legacy*, «European Journal of Political Theory» IV, no. 4, 2005, 453-65, an extended review of *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, ed. M. van Gelderen and Q. Skinner, 2 vols., Cambridge 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See especially SKINNER, *The republican ideal*, 303 f.

<sup>10</sup> J. HANKINS, *Exclusivist Republicanism and the Non-Monarchical Republic*, «Political Theory» XXXVIII, 2010, 451-482.

<sup>11</sup> R. BIRELEY, *The Counter-Reformation Prince: Anti-Machiavellianism or Catholic Statecraft in Early Modern Europe*, Chapel Hill – London 1990.

<sup>12</sup> See SKINNER, *The republican ideal*, esp. 301 f.

<sup>13</sup> On this point see also E. NELSON, *The Problem of the Prince*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. J. Hankins, Cambridge 2007, 319-337.

<sup>14</sup> PATRIZI'S treatises, *De institutione reipublicae libri novem* (written in the 1460s) and *De regno et regis institutione* (1470s), frequently published in the sixteenth century, have no modern editions. For Brandolini's *Comparatio reipublicae et regni*, see Aurelio Lippi BRANDOLINI, *Republics and Kingdoms Compared*, ed. J. Hankins, Cambridge (Mass.) 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Patrizi, *De institutione reipublicae* 1.1.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Uberto DECEMBRIO, *De republica libri IV* in Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana MS B 123 sup, f. 90r (Book II); CASTIGLIONE, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, Book IV; Francesco PATRIZI, *De institutione reipublicae* 1.8; Francesco GUICCIARDINI, *Discorso di Logrogno*, in A. MOULAKIS, *Republican Realism in Renaissance Florence*, Lanham (Maryland) 1998, 121-129.

<sup>17</sup> For example Matteo PALMIERI, *Vita civile*, ed. G. Belloni, Firenze 1982, 136.

<sup>18</sup> For example Leonardo BRUNI, *History of the Florentine People*, 3 vols., Cambridge (Mass.) 2001-2007, II, 326 (7.48).

<sup>19</sup> P. PETTIT, *A Republican Law of Peoples*, «European Journal of Political Theory, IX, no. 1, 2010, 70-94.

<sup>20</sup> See M. HORNQVIST, *Two Myths of Civic Humanism*, in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, 105-142, at 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Leonardo Brunis Rede auf Nanni Strozzi: Einleitung Edition und Kommentar*, ed. S. Daub, Stuttgart – Leipzig 1996, 285. The same argument, clearly dependent on Bruni, is used by Bartolomeo Scala in his *Defense against the Detractors of Florence*; see SCALA, *Essays and Dialogues*, ed. R. N. Watkins, Cambridge (Mass.) 2008, 252-254 (§17).

<sup>22</sup> J. HANKINS, *Rhetoric, history and ideology: the civic panegyrics of Leonardo Bruni*, in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, 143-178.

<sup>23</sup> The argument is found in Book I of BRUNI'S *History*, 48-54, and also in his earlier *Laudatio Florentine urbis*, ed. S. Baldassarri, Firenze 2000, 15-19.

<sup>24</sup> One example of many: Francesco PATRIZI, *De regno* 1.13, who gives a sharply anti-republican review of the century before the Caesars came to power.

<sup>25</sup> See, by way of contrast, P. PETTIT, *A republican law of peoples*, «European Journal of Political Theory» IX, 2010, 70-94.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Francesco PATRIZI, *De institutione reipublicae* 1.4.

<sup>27</sup> SCALA, *Defense*, 254-256 (§19).

<sup>28</sup> Needless to say, monarchical theorists such as Aurelio Lippo BRANDOLINI made the same claims for monarchies vis à vis republics; see his *Republics and Kingdoms Compared*, esp. 2.8-9, 2.17, 3.30, 3.51.

<sup>29</sup> The claim that monarchies are more corrupt on the surface might be taken as a complaint about arbitrary domination of citizens by powerful individuals, but the modern understanding of a polity that aims at non-domination is concerned with structures – laws, policies and socio-economic institutions that enable domination of others – not the corruption of such structures.

<sup>30</sup> Alamanno RINUCCINI, *La libertà perduta: Dialogus de libertate*, ed. F. Adorno, tr. G. Civati, Monza 2003.

<sup>31</sup> The classic works are H. BARON, *The Crisis of the Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, 2 vols., Princeton 1955, rev. ed. in one volume 1966, and J. G. A. POCKOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton 1975.

<sup>32</sup> SKINNER, *The republican ideal*, 302, 306-7.

<sup>33</sup> BRUNI, *Rede auf Nanni Strozzi*, 302. See CICERO, *Somnium Scipionis* 16, 24, 26.

<sup>34</sup> A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Notre Dame 1984; M. FOUCAULT, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris 1966.

<sup>35</sup> A fine recent overview of Florentine political conflicts is J. M. NAJEMY, *A History of Florence*, Oxford 2008.